TOMORROW'S LAYMAN
I CORINTHIANS 12:4-12
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Paul had a tiger by the tail in that Corinthian Church. The good citizens of Corinth were strong people; a blend of the cosmopolitan atmosphere of their seaport city, the infusion of cultural influence from all over the world: a mixture of pagan religions, Greek philosophy and orthodox Judaism. They were a contentious bunch, given - apparently - to rivalry and competitiveness. And when they became Christians they brought much of what there were, and had been, into the new Christian community in their city. When they observed the Lord's Supper some of them were so enthusiastic that they gorged themselved on the food and got drunk on the wine. When they began to perform particular functions within the Church they were continually comparing their respective tasks in terms of importance. Apparently there was quite a dispute about who was most important - about which tasks were really vital to the Church - and of course, about who reposed where in the ecclesiastical pecking order.

And so Paul, gently - patiently, delt with this problem by way of several paragraphs in a letter he was writing to them - that portion of I Corinthians which I read this morning. There are many gifts, he told them, many different talents and skills and abilities. God has given them all, and God needs them all. All are necessary to the common good and none is more important more essential, more spiritual or holy than any of the others. The Church is like a body - and it depends on all its parts performing the function they are best suited to perform. The task of the Christian, as Paul saw it, was not to become something other than the person was: but to be oneself - joyfully and gratefully in the service of God and Man.

The point of all of that is that there are a variety of ways to go about being a disciple of Jesus Christ - a Christian - a Churchman - a layman. There is - and must be - a great diversity of "laymanship" which springs out of the very diversity of people themselves. And finally, that no one is more of a Christian as a product what he does. Healers are not more important than teachers: men who experience the Spirit by speaking in tongues are not more Christian than men who do not, etc.

Unfortunately, much of that has been lost on the Church. Quite early in its existence the Christian Church took the flexible amd moving models of discipleship in the New Testament and squeezed them into a rigid ecclessiastical mold -or rather two molds, one called clergy, the other-laity. And it's not difficult to understand how it happened. As the Church became an institution, an organization, certain people naturally emerged as leaders. And just as naturally those leaders

were given a title, set aside for their special tasks, gradually elevated in both esteem and authority, until they became a very special brand of Christian. And at this stage of development the Church reached backward into the religion of the Temple - and outward into the other religions of the day to borrow an idea that was comfortable, traditional and diametrically opposed to the ideas of the Nazareth Carpenter: namely that the things of the spirit must be divorced as totally as possible from the things of the world. The realm of the Holy is something different - something apart - accessible only to the special, holy man. Their Lord manifestly was not one of those: he was no priest - in fact he experienced the most severe opposition from those who had a stake in perpetuating the concept of a religious elite. One of the most striking symbols in the Gospel narratives is the rending of the Temple veil at the time of crucifixion: the veil that divided the Holy of Holies from the ordinary people. Yet that symbol was ~~rendered~~ made meaningless by the early church as the Holy was stuffed back into its place, safe and undefiled by the world, accessible only to the few.

Now combine those two powerful forces: the emergence of ~~administrative~~ leaders granted esteem and power: and the idea that the things of the spirit are to be experienced as far away from the things of ordinary life as possible = and the result is, simply put, two kinds of Christians -Clergymen and layman. One is isolated from the world, undefiled by such worldly concerns as earning a living, sex, children: the other emersed in the world but totally dependent on the first to put them in touch occassionally with the holy: through prayer - which it was quickly assumed they could do best; through reading the sacred texts - which were kept in a language they alone could read; through sacred ritual - which they alone could perform.

From this development it was not far to the theological rationale which followed under the guise of "vocation." Men have always assumed that God's will could be perceived in things as they are: that is - if this is the way it is, God must have intended it this way. Thus, if certain men are special Christians God must have singled them out for their position. God calls men to be clergymen, it was suggested and then believed, and calls to clergymen are the only calls he issues: thus to be a clergymen is to have a "vocation" a "calling".

As one who has inherited that mantle of tradition let me share with you that its pretty

nice. It's not bad to have other folks think that you are a little ~~more-than-human~~ better than anyone else that you have access to secrets nobody else knows: that the holy is always at your fingertips: and that somehow you should be spared the performance standards rigorously applied to every other profession. It's really rather nice. But let me share my deepest conviction that it is totally and utterly in violation of the word and spirit of the New Testament. It is demeaning to the clergyman as a human being and the layman as a Christian. - because of vocation

As I read it, the New Testament talks about one vocation only - namely that we are called to be the Children of God, and that our calling is to be lived in the framework of our lives however we have chosen to lead them.

Yet, only the naive can fail to perceive that we are here offending something that runs deeply through the traditional piety and religiosity of our culture. It differs according to geography, and denomination and the personal style of the particular clergyman. But it's always there a kind of superficial respect - that can quickly become patronizing and fawning: it is still rather universally assumed that a clergyman is something less than a human being. One of the most ammusing things people have said to me on occasion is - ("But you don't look like a minister".) And one of the most profoundly disterbing things that people say is ("Reverend, I really admire you for your calling.") You see, what that says is that everyone else is a kind of second team Christian: that God had it in mind that I should be a Presbyterian minister, but whether you became a teacher or a housewife was no concern of his.

What Paul was about in his letter to the Corinthians - and what is so vitally important to the church today - is that God has given each of us something special - a gift - a talent - a skill - that is unique and particularly ours. And that God has called you and me to be what we are - to use what we have been given - as his children - in his service. There is no major and minor league in the Kingdom: no first and second team. In Jesus Christ - who was a carpenter - a very common layman - God has called all of us - equally.

Until recently, a layman who was serious about his churchmanship, had a rather simple assignment: he did what his minister wanted him to do. And if he did enough - if he performed as many ~~administrative~~ chores as he could around the Church, it was assumed that he just mught benefit from that special holiness that surrounds the full-time minister.

But that day is gone. There is a lot of unrest in and about the Church today. And part of it, at least, is coming from sensitive, creative laymen who want their churchmanship - their discipleship - to mean more than ushering at Sunday service. Part of it is coming from some very healthy and stalwart souls who are seeing that the holy isn't confined to the Church: that God's work goes on out in the world where they spend their time - and from where their minister is notoriously absent. Tomorrow's layman is g-ing to have to have some better basis for this Churchmanship than he has been offered before. And I believe it will be in a rediscovery of the authentic Biblical basis of God's call comeing to all men to be his men wherever they are and whatever they are doing.

Truman Douglas of the U.C.C., has suggested that is presumptious at this point for the Clergyman to tell the layman what that means: that the layman is the expert. I am either smarter or more foolish than Dr. Douglas because I'm going to try -in general terms - to do just that.

Part of God's call, I would suggest, is to be in the Church; ~~that call, remember, that comes to all others~~. I have chosen to be in it full-time, as the way I earn my living. But the call is to all of us. God calls us to the Koinonia - the fellowship of people who share a common faith, a common hope about the future: the laos - the whole of God who learn together, and grow together, and serve the world together. Having already implied, that being a Churchman is much more than doing jobs around the Church, let me hasten to add that we would not survive long without lay attention to the unspectacular administrative and organizational matters of the institution. The clergyman - in an active parish - cannot do it all and do any of it very well. It takes more than 70 persons every Sunday morning to do what we do in this building for two and one half hours. It takes people spending hours in committee meeting, making calls, washing dishes, painting walls. Any delusions that I am a one man operation are quickly put to rest when my secretary becomes ill. And I have come to the conclusion that Churches that are most effective in the highest theological sense - that is, as the announcer of the good news, the fellowship and the servant - are those that pay attention to administrative detail: those in which lay people give time and leadership. Now, some things become obvious at this point. It does-not take every member to fill the committee and teaching responsibilities of our current

program. If everyone volunteered to teach Church School - the superintendent would have a heart attack, I'm sure: but we don't need everybody - administratively. Beyond that, not everybody can teach - not everybody has the time to give. Yet God's call is to the Church - to participation in and responsibility for the life of the Church.

But it doesn't stop there. All of us are called, in John A. T. Robinson's words, to a kind of "Holy Worldliness". By that he does not mean a particularly identifiable kind of piety, but a being in the world, "up to the hilt", yet with a difference. That difference is that we are in the world as children of God our father; that we receive our accredidation from him and not from the world: that we receive our marching orders from him and no one else. ("In, but not of, the world" the New Testament puts it. And it is substantially different from the tradidional definition of Churchmanship that has taught us that a man is really being a Christian when he stands apart, when he keeps himself pure and undefiled from the world - when he preserves his soul by not losing it. Jesus told his disciples to act like salt. And it has been suggested that he didn't mean in a salt cellar, but out there melting the ice, or flavoring the food, or cleansing the wound.

The Rev. Donald Benedict put it succinctly: "Come, Follow me' was not a call to individual salvation by removal from historic reality but rather a call to participation and involvement." (Who's Killing the Church) And that call comes to all of us: ministers of the Church, teachers, bricklayers, homemakers, salesmen.

Let me suggest three ways God's work goes on in the world - three vocations if you will. A trip to the pediatrics ward is always a religious experience for me. A three week old infant, having undergone extensive intestional surgery, and now peering out through the glass of her incubator, well healed - is eloquent testimony that God's will does get done by people other than clergymen.

A politician - who is honest, who cares about right and wrong, who will take the risks of being compassionate about human lives rather than tax-payers pocketbooks is certainly, in my mind, serving the father of all men.

And finally - the ordinary person, no doctor or politicaian - just the person who knows how to love: who can sense my hurt, my need: who has the grace to rejoice with me - and weep with me - is performing the noblest of Christian ministries.

You know, a funny thing happens on the way to Christian discipleship. We don't really believe it when we read it, but Jesus did say the way to find your life is to lose it. He did say that his yoke - this yoke of living in the world as servants and lovers is ~~light~~ easy, and his burden - this burden of caring about all sorts of people that we don't want to care about - that burden - is light.

We don't always believe that - but it's true. To answer God's call - to be his children where we are is to experience a new joy, a depth of life that just isn't very common. The N.T. calls it salvation...

May God bless us as we - each in a different way - with different gifts - live as his people. AMEN

Father, we are grateful for the Church - and for the world where we do our living. Help us to see that both are holy: that we can serve you in ways that seem strange and different today as we gather and tomorrow as we scatter. Go with us - for we would be your people. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN